

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

DOI 10.35218/tco.2022.12.2.11

Music – main character in theatre productions

Antonella CORNICI •

Abstract: What we hear in a theatre production is as important as what we see. The sound universe has always been present in theatre, starting from the renowned gong sound and ending with the roaring of the applause. Let's not forget that the gong is one of the oldest and most authentic musical instruments of all times, used for thousands of years in the healing and meditation ceremonies and maybe healing is a part of theatre's mission.

Music has invariably been a vital entity in theatre productions. In fact, the music in the shows came at the same time with the birth of theatre. Music is a “crucial instrument” in theatre's “accompaniment”.

Keywords: music, theatre, sound, character, show

Motto:

Music is composed of sounds, just like life is composed of matter.

Rudolph Reti

Aristotle claimed that the six elements that form a drama are the following: *narrative, character, mindset, phrasing, show and music*. Historically speaking, almost every known theatre format has included a musical component in its plays.

The dramatic text and the music are tightly bound together in a performance and they can create spectacular and emotional visual and audible moments. Unfortunately, in spectacle chronicles the sound universe can hardly be found to be mentioned, be it musical illustration or composition.

”Music's role in theatre has depended on many factors throughout history, but almost constantly it appeared at the meeting of the spectacle with the spectator. Directly involved or only as a mere illustration, music rather crossed universal theatre's whole journey. Music and its performers have ever been a part in the making of theatre productions.”¹

* Director, PHD university lecturer at ”George Enescu” National University of Arts, Faculty of Theatre, Performing Arts - Direction

¹ Cristina Modreanu, *Muzica în teatru: de la „divertisment metafizic” la muzical original românesc*, Caietele Masca, Tema #5: Muzica de teatru, Bucureşti, 2017

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In the theatre show, the universe of the sound can be identified either as a musical illustration, or as a musical composition. Sometimes this sound universe is represented by a series of noises and/or effects (murmur, waves, wind, howl – *zgomotecă*²). Even so, can we consider the music of a production as a main character?

Excluding the musical show, where it is clear that music becomes a vital character in the specific creation process, we often discover the “background sound” between the scenes, acts, episodes or even “beneath” the scenes. This “background sound” creates a unique atmosphere, deepens or relieves tension, “charges” the actor and the public, expresses emotion and consolidates, thus becoming a main character in the performance.

Musical illustration or composition?

In an interview for Scena9, Bobo Burlăcianu said that “in theatre music there are three directions: one of musical illustration, where I have to find already known songs of other artists and to fit them in the show where they are needed; the second – to compose instrumental pieces that can suit the stage; the third direction is the actual work with the actors, when they have to perform the songs live. I love working with the actors.”³



Tibor Cări – composer⁴

² Term used in radio, television, film and theatre, referring to a digital library that contains various effects and sounds.

³ <https://www.scena9.ro/articles/in/personaje/generatia-9/2>

⁴ <https://cultural21.ro/2018/12/02/despre-magicianul-care-faureste-muzica-pentru-povesti/> data download: octombrie 2022

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There are, though, composers that do not agree with musical illustration on a theatre stage. One of the is Tibor Cári: „I have met directors that do not want to work with composers. When I asked why, I have been told that they don't know how and what to request from a composer. That is why you get to see many shows where the musical illustration is, in fact, the director's favorite music.”⁵

About music – main character in theatre production, Tibor Cári says: „when the creators of the show choose music as a main character, it is important that the communication and the common mindset of the director and composer are more intense. The musical moments are very important, they must not only represent a simple sound atmosphere. I think that the best example in this case are the productions worked alongside Victor Ioan Frunză! In those performances that I worked on, music had its moment, it became a mandatory and strong part in the actor's interpretation. Just like the actor has his story (the character's story), music needs to have a story that supports the scene and, of course, the actor.”⁶

A very special composer is Vlaicu Golcea. He creates another genre of theatre music and he does not “illustrate”. The music signed by him is “scenography, but an audible one. It has the exact same functions and it also vibrates in waves that he can hear but not see. The soundtrack should be a perfect tool to form the shape of the “unseen” of a production. It can evoke feelings and meddle with the potentiometers that refer to many aspects that the director should want to encrypt in the semiotics of the sound. As well as in dance, movies or performances – music ought to be an optional element and therefore used with all the reasons in the world.”⁷

Many of the great composers of the world have created for theatre, says the musician Keith Jarrett: „Only think of Henry Purcell, Edvard Grieg, Kurt Weill, Benjamin Britten, Beethoven, Schubert, Handel, Leonard Bernstein and Philip Glass, to name a few that were inspired by the collaboration with theatre creators.”⁸

A director that uses plenty of music in his productions is Alexander Hausvater. Music really becomes a main character in his stagings, for it actively takes part in the ongoing of the plot, influences, sustains and also defines it.

„Music is the soul of creativity. My theatre cannot exist without music. In any style I would direct, music is one of the primary characters. It is the only art that represents the soul of creativity. There is no art that can be done without music. It composes the human's ability to create a feeling from which a story results or a ritual is being initiated. When we are working on a show's music, we actually work on a feeling. At the first rehearsal, before I know anything about the performance, the actors listen to this music. There is no rehearsal without music, whether it is live or

⁵ Interview with Tibor Cári, martie 2022

⁶ Interview with Tibor Cári, martie 2022

⁷ <https://vlaicugolcea.ro/interviuri/>

⁸ <https://www.popmatters.com/how-important-is-music-to-theatre>

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recorded. The actor cannot speak a word or make a move without knowing the music. Even with a background music during a monologue, you must intertwine the musicality of the word and action with the musical composition. There is no shape or theatrical style without music.”⁹

Music – a contemporary cultural manifesto

The production of the National Theatre of Timisoara, *Hamlet* script by Ștefan Peca after William Shakespeare, director Ada Lupu, brings up to light this musical phenomenon, called contemporary cultural manifesto. The musical composition is signed by Subcarpați – an underground folklore band that affirms that music is not *showbiz* for them. *Hamlet* is a production that mixes electronic music, hip-hop and drum & bass beats with Romanian folklore.



<https://www.eventim.ro/ro/bilete/hamlet-timisoara-teatrul-national-mihai-eminescu-sala-mare-429301/event.html> - data download: octombrie 2022

„The idea of staging Hamlet in the immediate reality occurred when I first met Bean, before a Subcarpați concert near the National Theatre, in the middle of a large audience that gathered to listen to them. I met a beautiful, authentic, normal person, traits I look for in the people around me but I don’t always find. The concert starts. On stage he continues to be the same, alongside his entire band. Their music becomes

⁹ <https://www.cotidianul.ro/verdi-e-un-contemporan-care-statea-in-randul-4-locul-24/>

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a personal approach, just as authentic. I asked myself then if the audience around me wouldn't need their own Hamlet and I realized that Shakespeare's play is contemporary with me and the people around me, as long as Hamlet is just a normal young man put in abnormal situations.”¹⁰

Although music has become more and more present in theatre performances, in Romania a theatrical music course does not exist in theatre schools.

For example, Bangor University in Great Britain has theatre music classes: *Music with Theatre and Performance BA (HONS)*. It's a three-year long class conceived to prepare performers and musicians to deepen their understanding of the musical and theatrical repertoires and to shape the students as critical and independent thinkers. The focus is not only on the development of creation, experimenting with the show structure regarding music, but also on developing directorial and playwriting abilities. The welcoming message of this University is provoking and optimistic at the same time: „At Bangor's you will be a part of a flourishing musical and show community, being able to assist music and theatre productions at Powis Hall, John Phillips Theatre and the magnificent Prichard-Jones Hall. You will be able to enjoy a large range of facilities in our innovation and arts center, Pontio, which includes a Studio Theatre meant for the performances that can benefit from professional technical support. Pontio also includes the Bryn Terfel Theatre, with a capacity of 450 that regularly lures in world renowned theatre performances and musical events. Furthermore, you will benefit from the connections that Bangor has with the local and national theatre companies and with music and theatre practitioners that visit and teach masterclasses.”¹¹

In theatre, music can transform in a main character, whether we talk about composition or illustration. Just as dance and movement can be a very important element in the theatre production. And so, we get to the concept of musical theatre/theatre-dance.

In the case of **musical production**, we are talking about a *complete kind of theatre, an artistic system that encourages the use of technique beyond the spoken word*, as Richard Kislan defined it. Not only the music “holds” the audience, but also the story that is told through songs. Music allows the directors to highlight the dramatic emotion. The music from musical theatre shows draws the attention and can gather a larger audience. A song from a musical can often survive longer than the actual musical popularity. A good example is the song *All that Jazz*, from the 1975 musical - Chicago. Although the production might not have been seen, the song is familiar to the majority of the people, and that is because of its chorus and well-known

¹⁰ <https://timpolis.ro/ada-lupu-hausvater-m-am-intrebat-daca-nu-cumva-publicul-are-nevoie-de-propriul-lui-hamlet/>

¹¹ <https://www.bangor.ac.uk/courses/undergraduate/w3w4-music-with-theatre-and-performance-ba-hons, tr.n>

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melody. Therefore, in musical theatre “the use of music accentuates any situation... so that when a character from the show suddenly bursts into singing, something of major importance is happening or is about to happen.”¹²



Vlaicu Golcea – composer¹³

In the last years, theatre seasons have been proposing to the audiences the musical performance more and more. This genre of production has become popular in the Romanian theatres very quickly. However, this style has no tradition in Romania. Cristina Modreanu observed that “for the local stage that had nurtured in its modern times revue and operetta at most and rarely cabaret, the appearance of the musicals has evoked and still evokes a fascination that almost eradicates the critical senses. It is offensive for this type of production to be seen just as a simple useful tool

¹² <https://russiarobinson.wordpress.com/2017/04/03/music-in-musicals-the-relationship-between-song-functions-and-hit-songs/>, tr.n.

¹³ <https://aleximreh.wordpress.com/2010/12/16/vlaicu-golcea-muzician-de-jazz-sound-designer-producator/> data download: octombrie 2022

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to bring more audience in theatres. Those who produce musicals, also have a responsibility to make relevant choices for the contemporary public eye, instead of just picking up famous international musical titles only for the success to be guaranteed. Theatre schools also have the responsibility to prepare performers that are able to execute musical's composition, including the musicality elements but also the harmonization of the movements, which is a key element in this type of production. To sing and to dance at the same time, to act with great credibility while singing and dancing, to quickly change pace from the singing to the speaking part, are abilities that need training and their absence visibly affects the final form of a production.”¹⁴

Music remains in theatre production a real main character, a magnificent connector of the director's concept and the audience, an *audible scenography*, as Vlaicu Golcea defines theatrical music.

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¹⁴ Cristina Modreanu, Muzica în teatru: de la „divertisment metafizic” la muzical original românesc, Caietele Masca, Tema #5: Muzica de teatru, Bucureşti, 2017